DOCUMENT RESUME

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INSTITUTION	Language Research Foundation, Cambridge, Mass.
SPONS AGENCY	Peace Corps (Dept. of State), Washington, D.C.
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DESCRIPTORS	Grammar, *Interviews, *Language Proficiency, *Language Tests, Listening Comprehension, Pronunciation, *Test Construction, *Test Interpretation, Vocabulary
IDENTIFIERS	*Peace Corps

ABSTRACT

This paper provides background on the procedures currently used in the language interviews conducted by the Peace Corps in testing Peace Corps Volunteer/Trainee performance in host country languages. The purpose of these face-to-face interviews, which are based on the interviews used by the Foreign Service Institute, is "to give the student an opportunity to demonstrate, in a conversational situation, the extent of his spoken mastery of the host country language, as well as his ability to understand the spoken language." The scheduling of interviews in the course of training and service is first discussed, followed by a description of the general structure of the interview. Under "Content of the Interview" the evaluation of student mastery in the areas of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and listening comprehension are dealt with. Finally interview scoring and interpretation are discussed, and a description of the five categories used to rate overall performance is presented. (FWB)

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ED 043023

A DESCRIPTION OF THE PEACE CORPS LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY INTERVIEW

Educational Testing Service

Although many Peace Corps trainees and volunteers are acquainted with the interviews conducted in host country languages, it seems desirable to provide you with some additional background on the interview technique, and the uses for which the results of these evaluations are intended.

The interview-conversation technique was developed by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), and until 1969, the bulk of the interviews were administered for the Peace Corps by FSI staff. In the summer of 1969, the Peace Corps entered into a contract with Educational Testing Service (ETS) under which ETS assumed responsibility for the interview testing program as well as for a comprehensive review of Peace Corps language evaluation needs. By early 1970, certain other language evaluation techniques will be introduced on an experimental basis for some of the common languages. These new techniques will not replace the interview, but will provide supplemental information on the student's language competence. [Throughout this, the term "student" will be used rather than the more cumbersome "trainee/volunteer."]

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We will provide you with additional information on the new techniques as they become available; this leaflet has been prepared to describe the current interview procedure in some detail and to suggest ways in which the results of the interview might be most useful.

Scheduling of Interviews in the Course of Training and Service

For the most part, students will be asked to participate in three interviews during the course of their training and service: 1) on entry into the training program, 2) at the conclusion of training in the United States, and 3) at some point during in-country service.

General Structure of the Interview

The language proficiency interview consists of a 15-20 minute conversation between the student and either one or two ETS qualified interviewers. When two interviewers are present, one conducts the conversation while the second listens and takes notes. The listener may enter the conversation occasionally. When only one interviewer is present, he, of course, performs both these functions. The notes being taken are not necessarily notations of weaknesses; positive features of the student's performance are also recorded.

ETS is currently tape-recording each language interview. These recordings are for research and development purposes, such as the training of new interviewers. They are for ETS use only, and do not make up any part of the student's official Peace Corps file.

Content of the Interview

The primary purpose of this face-to-face interview is to give the student an opportunity to demonstrate, in a realistic

conversational situation, the extent of his spoken mastery of the host country language, as well as his ability to understand the spoken language. The interviewer, therefore, is not interested in "tricking the student," or finding out what he "doesn't know" in the negative sense. The interviewer makes every effort to put the student at ease, to engage him in interesting topics of conversation, and to lead him in gradual stages to his maximum level of speaking proficiency.

The specific content of each interview is not fixed, and there may well be substantial differences in the topics discussed. It is therefore not useful for the student to try to anticipate details of the conversation based on the experience of others, or to attempt to "prepare" a conversation beforehand.

Although, as stated above, the interviewer does not cover the same topics in each conversation, he does attempt to determine the student's level of mastery in several linguistic areas. These are:

Pronunciation and Accent

A pronunciation which is sufficiently accurate to avoid confusion as to the particular sounds which the student intends is the major evaluation criterion. Beyond this, the student's degree of command of a phonetically accurate pronunciation (the absence of obviously non-native elements of accent, intonation and phrasing) is also taken into account.

Grammatical Accuracy

In the Peace Corps language training program considerable emphasis is placed on the development of grammatical accuracy.

Since structure is indeed the backbone of the language, entering into each sentence produced regardless of the particular topic or vocabulary involved, it is reasonable and desirable that the Peace Corps program stress the development of an accurate structural command of the language. Given a good structural control of the host-country language, the student should be able to develop a broader vocabulary and to increase his level of fluency through practice in the field. It is doubtful, however, that the student will greatly increase his structural accuracy in the field, since the Peace Corps experience has been that extensive practice in a formal and controlled (i.e., classroom) situation is usually required to master grammatical structures, especially those which differ from structures in the student's native language.

To check the student's level of grammatical control, the interviewers will typically attempt to stimulate a discussion of topics which require or suggest the use of various verb modes, tenses, and persons beyond the simple narrative present and the first person ("I") forms. The accurate use of adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and other aspects of language structure also will be evaluated in the course of the interview.

Vocabulary

The extent of the student's spoken vocabulary is noted throughout the course of the interview. Emphasis is placed on a wide-ranging vocabulary which allows the student to talk freely and accurately on a number of different topics, including but by no means restricted to vocabulary appropriate to his work

assignment. The best preparation for the vocabulary aspect of the interview is not a last-minute study of word lists but rather the gradual and natural accumulation of vocabulary through classroom work together with extensive outside exposure to the language through films, conversations with native speakers or more advanced students, and so forth.

Fluency

Fluency does not refer here to the absolute speed of delivery, since native speakers of any language often show wide variation in this area. Fluency, for purposes of the interview, refers to the overall smoothness, continuity, and naturalness of the student's speech, as opposed to pauses for rephrasing sentences, groping for words, and so forth.

Listening Comprehension

It is difficult to evaluate listening comprehension in a highly objective manner using a conversational technique. If a student is able to carry out a rather sophisticated conversation on the basis of spoken leads and comments given by the interviewer, it is reasonably certain that the student has acquired a listening comprehension proficiency at least up to the level represented by the general nature of the conversation. It is, however, possible that the student's listening proficiency as such could be quite high, but that limitations in his ability to speak the language would prevent him from responding readily to questions or conversational leads which he understood perfectly well. Plans are currently being made to develop a test of listening comprehension

for Peace Corps use which would be administered independently of the language proficiency interview to provide additional information about this area of the student's language competence. In the meanwhile, students' listening comprehension ability will continue to be judged, albeit somewhat roughly, on the basis of the face-to-face interview. The interviewers are instructed to give the benefit of the doubt to the student, and to assume as a matter of course that his listening proficiency is at least on a level with his interview performance.

Interview Scoring and Interpretation

The language proficiency interview is unlike most tests in that it does not yield a numerical score based on the number of questions answered correctly. Rather, the results of the interview are reported on the basis of discrete categories of overall performance. Descriptions of these categories are as follows:

Category 1

> Able to satisfy routine travel needs and minimum courtesy requirements. Can ask and answer questions on topics very familiar to him; within the scope of his very limited language experience can understand simple questions and statements, allowing for slowed speech, repetition or paraphrase; speaking vocabulary inadequate to express anything but the most elementary needs; errors in pronunciation and grammar are frequent, but can be understood by a native speaker used to dealing with foreigners attempting to speak his language. While elementary needs vary considerably from individual to individual, any person at the Category 1 level should be able to order a simple meal, ask for shelter or lodging, ask and give simple directions, make purchases, and tell time.

Category 2

> Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility

most social situations including introductions and casual conversations about current events, as well as work, family, and autobiographical information; can handle limited work requirements, needing help in handling any complications or difficulties; can get the gist of most conversations on non-technical subjects (i.e., topics which require no specialized knowledge) and has a speaking vocabulary sufficient to express himself simply with some circumlocutions; accent, though often quite faulty, is intelligible; can usually handle elementary constructions quite accurately but does not have thorough or confident control of the grammar.

Category 3

Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social and professional topics. Can discuss particular interests and special fields of competence with reasonable ease; comprehension is quite complete for a normal rate of speech; vocabulary is broad enough that he rarely has to grope for a word; accent may be obviously foreign; control of grammar good; errors never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the native speaker.

Category 4

Able to use the language fluently and accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Can understand and participate in any conversation within the range of his experience with a high degree of fluency and precision of vocabulary; would rarely be taken for a native speaker, but can respond appropriately even in unfamiliar situations; errors of pronunciation and grammar quite rare; can handle informal interpreting from and into the language.

Category 5

Speaking proficiency equivalent to that of an educated native speaker. Has complete fluency in the language such that his speech on all levels is fully accepted by educated native speakers in all of its features, including breadth of vocabulary and idiom, colloquialisms, and pertinent cultural references.

Ideally, the best sort of "score report" for a student whose interview performance fell into one of the above categories would be to present verbatim the entire verbal description of that category.

For obvious clerical reasons, it is more efficient simply to report the category number corresponding to the verbal description. This "shorthand" procedure has two potential drawbacks of which both students and Peace Corps staff should be aware. The first is the tendency for a person to forget the verbal definitions corresponding to the numerical categories, and to deal with the numbers according to some private (and possibly erroneous) notion about what the numbers mean. The second is to assume that because the interview results are expressed as a set of continuous numbers there is a straightforward and uniform increase in student performance from one category rating to another, for example, that the amount of student improvement represented by a score increase from "2" to "3" is the same amount of improvement as that represented by an increase from "3" to "4." On the contrary (as can be seen by referring to the verbal descriptions), the amount of student work and improvement required to go from one category to another generally <u>increases</u> with each higher category. Thus, the transition from category "1" to category "2" could probably be made by a student who over a period of several weeks succeeded in establishing a reasonably consistent control of basic grammar and who in addition acquired a workable but not especially extensive vocabulary for his work area and for other general topics. The transition from "2" to "3," on the other hand, would probably require conscientious training in and practice of most grammatical patterns to a point at which they could be pro-

duced almost automatically. The vocabulary expectations would also be considerably increased for both breadth and depth, and considerations of fluency and pronunciation accuracy would assume greater prominence. A category increase from "3" to "4" would require a close approximation of native standards for the various rating factors: thus, language precision at the "4" level could probably not be attained during the regular Peace Corps training program unless the student were unusually proficient in the language before entering the program.

In summary of the above, while the student just beginning the language could reasonably hope for proficiency increases of one or possible two categories up to about the "2" or in some cases "3" level, a higher category would not usually be reached because of the substantially greater increases in amount and quality of mastery associated with these levels.

To recognize and make allowance for the often considerable increase in language performance involved in the transition from one basic category to another, a supplementary rating system has been adopted whereby each category score (except for "5," which represents native proficiency) can be modified with a "plus" (i.e., "0+," "1+," "2+," "3+," "4+,"). The "plus" is used to indicate that the student's proficiency <u>substantially exceeds the minimum requirements for the category involved, but fails to fulfill all of the requirements for the next higher category</u>. For example, a student whose pronunciation, grammar, and comprehension is at the "3" level but who has a particularly extensive command of spoken vocabulary and whose overall fluency is appre-

ciably higher than that required for the "3" level might be assigned a rating of "3+" to denote his considerable additional strength in these areas. A rating of "4" would not, however, be appropriate since the "4-level" requirement is not met in all areas of concern.

The bases on which "plus" values are assigned are not formally described in any greater detail than that given in the underlined passage above. The individual interviewers are left the opportunity to determine what additional strength or combination of strengths in the student's performance can be considered a "substantial" increase over the basic requirements for a given category.

At the completion of testing for a particular training group or in-country group, the ETS interviewers will transmit to the appropriate Peace Corps staff member (at training centers, usually the language coordinator) a roster of student scores showing the categories assigned, with "plus" values where appropriate. The Peace Corps staff will determine the time and manner in which the category ratings are made known to the students. The ETS interviewers will thus not tell the student the category assigned him but will, on the other hand, be glad to talk to him about particular language strengths and weaknesses identified in the course of the interview. About five minutes are allocated at the end of each interview-conversation for feedback of this type, and students are encouraged to take this opportunity to discuss the language (as opposed to "score") aspects of the interview at that time.

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Category 3

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